C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MEXICO 003148

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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL MX
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE: CALDERON ON POINTS, AMLO ON
EXPECTATIONS

REF: MEXICO 2240

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANTONIO O. GARZA, JR., REASONS: 1.4(B/D).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the second and final of the
presidential debates, front-running candidates Felipe
Calderon of the National Action Party (PAN) and Andres Manuel
Lopez Obrador (AMLO) of the Party of the Democratic
Revolution were widely perceived to have debated to a near
draw. The debate focused on the issues of public security,
governability, foreign policy/migration, federalism and state
reform. Although the majority of instant polls and
commentators gave a slight advantage to Calderon, several
gave the edge to AMLO. In our view, Calderon won narrowly on
substance and debating points, while AMLO succeeded in
portraying himself as measured, responsible and presidential,
and probably connected better with the masses. Roberto
Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)
improved his performance over that of the first debate, but
most commentators, including some from his own party,
suggested the improvement was too little, too late. On the
issue of foreign policy, all five candidates promised to seek
an immigration accord with the United States, with AMLO
stating that he sought a mutually respectful and cooperative
bilateral relationship. Unlike Calderon's clear victory in
the first debate (reftel), which yielded a significant
post-debate bounce, we believe that the second debate will
have a less pronounced -- and perhaps less predictable --
impact on a race that remains in a technical, two-way tie.
End summary.

Polls and Pundits Yield No Clear Victor

¶2. (SBU) Instant polls taken after the debate, as well as
the majority of commentators canvassed, tended to give a
slight advantage to Calderon, although they were far from
unanimous in doing so. A nationwide telephone poll taken by
leading daily Reforma revealed that 44% of respondents
considered Calderon the winner, as compared with 30% for
AMLO, and 11% for Madrazo. A panel of approximately 200
pundits and opinion makers canvassed by Reforma showed a 54%
to 31% to 9% victory for Calderon over AMLO and Madrazo,
respectively. El Universal saw the outcome of the debate in
less clear-cut terms. It canvassed five small focus groups
convened in Mexico City, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Toluca
(Mexico State), and Veracruz; all but the focus group in
Veracruz opined that AMLO had emerged the winner. Although
an Excelsior poll called the debate for Calderon, 37% to 28%,
Diariomonitor called it for AMLO, 56% to 37%.

Calderon Again Proves a Sure-footed Debater

¶3. (SBU) Calderon's substantive, quick-witted performance

undoubtedly consolidated his support among his core
constituencies in the middle (and upper) class, while he
sought to reach a broader audience by emphasizing his
sensitivity to social problems. As in the April debate, he
proved skillful at enumerating his policy prescriptions, in
offering well-placed attacks against his opponents --
principally AMLO -- and in responding effectively to their
charges.

¶4. (U) Arguing that this election would set Mexico's course
for the next 25 years, Calderon urged voters to opt for his
program emphasizing the rule of law, employment, and economic
certainty. With respect to public security, he proposed
unifying the various branches of the federal police,
revamping an ineffective Mexico City police force,
instituting life sentences for kidnappers and other serious
criminals, and instituting oral trials. He criticized AMLO's
stewardship of Mexico City, charging that criminality had
increased significantly during his term. He said he would
seek to form a coalition or national unity government to
promote governability and emphasized the importance of order,
observing that machetes must not be permitted to prevail over
the rule of law. Turning to foreign policy, like his rivals
he proposed an immigration accord with the U.S. and pledged
to support small-scale farmers when the Mexican corn and bean
market is opened to NAFTA in 2008. He pledged to seek U.S.
and Canadian assistance for those states producing the most
migrants.

¶5. (SBU) With respect to state reform, he pledged absolute
transparency in government finances, advocated reducing
public funding of political parties, and reducing the number
of members of Congress. In his closing remarks, he
reiterated his frequent assertion that AMLO represented a

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"danger" for Mexico.

¶6. (SBU) Note: Prior to the extensive work done by post
with Mexican states on the issue of oral trials, the topic of
justice reform was not a priority for any of the political
parties and was seen by some as an American imposition. Last
week, the campaigns of the three leading candidates requested
an update on USAID-funded rule of law reforms, which was
provided to all five campaigns. This information was drawn
on in last night's debate by four of the five candidates --
AMLO making only a passing reference -- and formed a central
part of the public security discussion. End note.

AMLO: The Great Unknown Surprises Many

¶7. (SBU) Having not participated in the first debate, some
observers doubted AMLO would be able to stand tow-to-toe with
Calderon in a setting in which he had little experience.
Nevertheless, AMLOs polished performance handily surpassed
those low expectations -- undermining the Chavez-esque image
portrayed by some detractors -- and his common touch
undoubtedly connected with many ordinary Mexicans. While he
evinced a preference for broad themes rather than concrete
policy proposals, AMLO spoke in measured, even reassuring
tones, and seemed confident and presidential.

¶8. (SBU) AMLO framed the election as offering a choice
between two competing visions, one offering a new economic
model that would favor the disadvantaged and end the elite's
privileges, and one offering "more of the same (as always)."
For example, with respect to public security, AMLO said he
would fight crime by addressing the root problems, poverty
and family disintegration, adding that he would also expand
the army's role in fighting crime. He argued that
governability would remain a challenge as long as rampant
inequality prevailed in Mexico. Nevertheless, quoting
Mexican icon Benito Juarez, he ruled out solving social
conflicts with force, promising to respect the constitution
and the division of powers. He proposed a

non-interventionist and non-activist foreign policy and
proved conciliatory towards the U.S., favoring a bilateral
relationship based on the principle of mutual respect and
cooperation. He said that the problem of migration could not
be solved with walls and that he favored an immigration
accord, adding that ultimately, the problem had to be
addressed at its roots, by creating jobs in regions that are
"expelling migrants." He said he hoped to see China play a
larger economic role in Latin America.

¶9. (U) On the issue of federalism and regional development,
he proposed (i) guaranteeing farm commodity prices to
strengthen the agricultural sector; (ii) stimulating the
construction and tourism sectors; and (iii) modernizing the
energy sector, without permitting privatization. As for
state reform, he ruled out the now pending structural reforms
allegedly favored by the "elite." In their place, he
proposed raising the right to various forms of social welfare
to "constitutional rank," and establishing the mechanisms of
referenda, plebiscite and recall elections.

¶10. (SBU) Reviewing last night's performance, a contact in
the AMLO campaign told poloff that the significance of the
debate was not whether AMLO had won or lost, but whether he
had succeeded in presenting the image of a prudent,
self-controlled leader who cared about the common people. In
that, she concluded, AMLO's performance was a resounding
success.

Madrazo's Improvement Too Little Too Late

¶11. (SBU) Although Roberto Madrazo improved significantly on
his poor performance in the first debate, his style remained
unengaging, and virtually all commentators agreed that any
improvement was too little, too late.

¶12. (SBU) As for substance, Madrazo strongly emphasized his
public security credentials, reiterating that criminals
feared him. He lamented the tendency towards negative
campaigning, suggesting that all the candidates sign a
civility pact after the debate. He termed President Fox's
foreign policy "a disaster area," charging that Mexico's
relations with both the U.S. and Latin America had
deteriorated during his sexenio. He criticized Fox's failure
to reach an immigration accord with the U.S., while
reiterating the importance of one. He strongly emphasized
the need for greater fiscal federalism, providing states and
municipalities with more resources to address local problems.

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 Playing perhaps his strongest card, he sought to claim the
political center, portraying his two main rivals as
immoderate.

¶13. (C) Chamber of Deputies Vice President Francisco Arroyo
(PRI) asserted to poloff today that Madrazo's improved
performance last night kept him in contention, even as he
admitted that AMLO and Calderon had out-performed Madrazo and
remained tied for first place. A senior PRI staffer in the
Congress differed, asserting that Madrazo's competent
performance would not be enough to overcome his
long-established negative reputation. Both opined that the
"split decision" between Calderon and AMLO would not yield a
post-debate bounce.

Minor Party Candidates Remain Minor

¶14. (SBU) Alternativa Candidate Patricia Mercado, in many
respects the star of the first debate for her articulate and
high-minded presentation, failed to reprise her earlier
performance. Although she stuck to the issues, she proved
less focused and more tentative than in the first debate and
scored poorly in the post-debate polls. It remains to be
seen whether her party continues to poll above the 2%

threshold needed to gain official registration. For his
part, Roberto Campa took a much more measured approach than
in the first debate, when his nearly histrionic performance
was widely ridiculed. In his closing remarks, he
acknowledged that he could not win the presidency, but urged
voters to ensure that the values and principles of the Nueva
Alianza were represented in Congress by splitting their
ticket and casting one of their ballots for his party. He
proposed that all five candidates commit themselves to
accepting the election results, a challenge accepted by all
of his rivals except AMLO.

Comment: A Split Decision and the Race Goes On
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¶15. (C) Because last night,s debate ended in what was
widely perceived to be a "split decision," it is difficult to
predict the impact it will have on the race, which remains in
a technical tie between Calderon and AMLO. Calderon
undoubtedly reinforced his image as being strong on
substance, and may win over some voters from the PRI's
conservative wing, who fear an AMLO presidency. It remains
to be seen, however, whether he demonstrated enough of a
common touch to make significant inroads among Mexico,s
disadvantaged masses. Conversely, AMLO may have reassured
some swing voters who had seen him as a lightweight or even a
rabble-rouser, and his folksy manner undoubtedly connected
with many ordinary Mexicans. Nevertheless, his repeated
harkening to class conflict -- no matter how soft-spoken --
will surely continue to leave Mexico's middle class cold.
Accordingly, we would not be surprised if, for all the high
expectations, last night's long-awaited encounter left the
dynamic in the race largely unchanged.

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GARZA